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AND OF

EARLY CHRISTIAN ART

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THE

STORY OF THE CATACOMBS

AND OF

EARLY CHRISTIAN ART

A Lecture

DELIVERED AT THE ROYAL ACADEMY

On TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 1908

BY

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THE STORY OF THE CATACOMBS AND OF EARLY CHRISTIAN ART.

INTRODUCTORY.

Circa A.D. 354.

WHAT now are these Catacombs? S. Jerome in the fourth century gives us a picture of his impressions of these wonderful Christian cemeteries which lay beneath the suburbs of Rome. It was somewhere about the year of grace 354 that Jerome was a boy at school in the imperial city. The ages of persecution were just over, and the Catacombs had generally ceased to be used for the Christian dead. He describes them thus: "When I was a boy," so he wrote, "receiving my education in Rome, I and my schoolfellows used on Sundays to make the circuit of the sepulchres of the Apostles and Martyrs. Many a time did we go down into the cemeteries. These are excavated deep in the earth, and contain on either hand as you enter, the bodies of the dead buried in the wall. It is all so dark there that the language of the Prophet seems to be fulfilled, 'Let them go down living into Hades.' Only occasionally is light let in to mitigate the horror of the gloom, and then not so much through a window as through a hole; you take each step with caution, as surrounded by deep night; you recall the words of Virgil—'Horror ubique animos

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simul ipsa silentia terrent'" (which Allard renders "le silence même y glace l'âme d'effroi").

These were the impressions of a visitor to the Catacombs in the middle of the fourth century. When Jerome wrote the above quoted words, the story of the great City of the Christian Dead had virtually been told, and comparatively speaking, few fresh interments took place after the first half of the century in which he wrote. After that date few works of any great importance were undertaken in what has been well termed "Subterranean Rome"; all that was left to be done after those visits of the young Jerome, was in some cases to decorate, and generally to make easy of access the more famous graves to the ever-increasing crowd of pilgrims from all lands who wished to venerate the last resting-places of the brave men and women who had so well played the parts of pioneers of the once persecuted but now triumphant Faith. In after years, Damasus the Bishop of Rome—the friend and master of the young scholar Jerome, whose words on the Catacombs have just been referred to—specially busied himself in this pious loving work. What Pope Damasus did in these mighty cemeteries will be told further on in this little history.

We will now record the impressions of a visitor to this same City of the Dead in the first years of the present century. This second visit was paid to the Catacombs some 1550 years after Jerome's pilgrimages which he has told us of in his own vivid words.

Circa A.D. 1900–4.

Some two miles from one of the gates of Rome there is a vineyard, ill-kept, overgrown with wild roses and a wealth of many-coloured flowers, such as grow unheeded

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and untended in the soft warm Italian air. In this vineyard is a little hill or rather bank, bright with a mosaic of many-coloured flowers. In the bank there is a low door, very rough and rude. The fossor (grave-digger—the old name used some sixteen or more centuries ago is still preserved), the guardian of the place, unlocks the door. The little company of scholars or pilgrims accompanying the fossor, follow him through the open door, each carrying a twisted coarse wax taper lighted, which in case of accidents will burn several hours. They go down a long flight of half-ruined steps that lead to a gloomy passage, quite dark —empty, as it seems at first—but as the eye becomes accustomed to the gloom, is seen to be full of graves, cut in the dark red-brown rock in tiers one over the other from floor to ceiling.

The "fossor" and his companions tread their way in single file through long corridors all panelled with graves of the dead, corridors or narrow passages faintly lit by the light of the wax tapers they are carrying. After a time they come upon a small open space, small indeed, but capable of holding a little company of one or two hundred people. It looks like a chapel, for at one end, an altar is hewn out of the rock; a rough stone bench runs round the chamber. A chair of some pretensions to dignity, with stone arms, is rudely hewn out of the red-brown rock. A few pictures are painted on the plaster of the low ceiling and on some part of the grave-panelled walls—pictures now very dim and discoloured with age—pictures, for instance, of the Good Shepherd with a Lamb in his arms, with sheep and lambs, now again of goats, standing round.

It is a strange place—haunted by something—you know not what—awe-inspiring, prayer-suggesting. It is not

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gruesome, though so dark and lonely and chill, and you feel—it is good to be there! Around reigns an awful silence, an almost palpable darkness.

A strange and almost terrifying change from the sky of Italy and the vineyard outside, with its warm quivering atmosphere of gold and azure, is this dark, silent chamber, with the graves cut in the rock where the dead sleep, tier above tier, with the dim, fading pictures of the Shepherd and the sheep—with the rough hewn stone benches, with the little broken altar, with the poor stone chair and its little show of dignity, with the recess in the rock dark with the oil which used to burn for centuries hard by that sacred chair, where *some* great one evidently used to sit and teach!

Dark, silent, lifeless, well-nigh airless—yes, lifeless, for never a lizard crawls in that sombre chamber, never a bat skims aimlessly to and fro in this chapel of death and prayer.

This is a rough but fairly accurate picture of a corner of that wonderful group of cemeteries which lies beneath the suburbs of Rome, cemeteries usually spoken of as "the Catacombs," and which contains probably some 600 to 800 miles of these passages and chambers where the Christians of Rome, in the years when their Religion was an unlawful cult, buried their dead, and in which, especially in the darker days of the more violent persecutions, innumerable gatherings were held by the many Christian communities of the City for prayer and praise, for mutual comfort and exhortation, from the times of Peter and Paul to the days of the last persecution of Diocletian, a period of some 250 years.

This vast City of the Dead possesses, as we shall see, more than a mere antiquarian interest.

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After the Peace of the Church, A.D. 313, the cemeteries of the Persecution were the chief objects of reverent interest to pilgrims of all lands to Rome, during the fourth and four following centuries. Then devastated and spoiled by successive barbarian raids, and when many of the sacred bodies of Martyrs and Confessors had been translated from their old resting-places in the Catacombs *outside* the City to more secure resting-places *inside* the City, they lost their absorbing interest, and became absolutely forgotten for nearly 800 years.

I.

It was in the year of grace 1578, when Queen Elizabeth was reigning in England, that some workmen digging out sand in a vineyard about 1¼ miles from Rome on the Via Salaria came upon the gallery of a subterranean cemetery, with paintings on the walls and many ancient Christian inscriptions. This strange discovery excited much curiosity at the time, and the world of Rome recalling to mind the long-forgotten story of the Catacombs, became suddenly aware that beneath its suburbs lay a vast unexplored City of the Dead. The famous scholar Baronius visited the new discovery, and tells us how deeply he was impressed with the possible importance to Christian history of this wonderful "find."

Baronius, however, was too fully occupied in his other work to pursue the investigation himself, and for nearly a

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century the searching into these vast regions of subterranean cemeteries—which received the general name of "Catacombs"—was left entirely to private individuals. Some of these were certainly scholars, some were belonging to religious communities, but for all these years there was no supervision over the toilers; no restraint placed upon the industrious well-meaning searchers, who with an undisciplined zeal, no one hindering them, often recklessly plundered these vast corridors and chapels of the dead, carrying off tablets of inscriptions simply to adorn churches and monasteries and private museums, using these precious memorials at times even for pavements, besides positively destroying a number of paintings in their vain efforts to remove them from the walls and ceilings. The havoc for which these early searchers were responsible, is simply indescribable. It was nearly a century after the first discovery that a stop was put to the mischief wrought by the many irresponsible workers by Pope Clement IX., who in the year 1668 placed the "Catacombs" under the State authority.

But it was now too late to repair the ruin which the ill-regulated and destructive excavations carried out by private individuals had already caused, and even now when the Papal Government at last interfered, no definite plan of investigation was adopted, the wholesale destruction and pillage—for it was really nothing else—was certainly stopped, but no scientific exploration scheme was really attempted.

Inscriptions, for instance, in many cases were carefully preserved, but no record was kept of the particular cemetery or spot where they were found, and as late as 1780–86 Agincourt, one of the most enlightened of the Catacomb scholars, positively attempted to bring away a number of paintings on the plaster of the walls, and watched them

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crumble away in the attempt to detach them from the position they had occupied for so many centuries.

While deploring, however, the irreparable mischief brought about by the long line of irresponsible searchers into the mysteries of the Catacombs during a period stretching over nigh three centuries, we must acknowledge the patient industry of some of these scholars and students, among these Bosio, who worked in the Catacombs for some 36 years, stands pre-eminent.

It was not until A.D. 1841 when Marchi the Jesuit father was appointed officially as superintendent, that the investigation of the buried treasures of the Catacombs began to be carried out scientifically as well as zealously. De Rossi was his pupil, and it is to the life-long labours of these famous scholars that our present deep and far-reaching knowledge of the great city of the dead which lies beneath the suburbs of the Queen City, is largely due.

De Rossi mournfully alludes to the story of the Catacombs since the date of their rediscovery in A.D. 1578 as an "Iliad of misfortunes and of irreparable disaster." Dr. Northcote, in his introductory chapter to "The Epitaphs of the Catacombs in Rome," thus sadly sums up the present position of the Catacomb mysteries. He tells us how De Rossi had studied more than fifteen thousand inscriptions recovered from the buried City of the Dead, and that a certain number are added to these year by year. This number, great though it seems, however, is contrasted with what existed in the eighth and ninth centuries, the statistics largely being drawn from the Pilgrim "Itineraries" or "Guide Books" of the seventh and eighth centuries.

What we *now* possess, he regretfully says, is scarcely *a seventh part* of the original wealth of the Roman Church

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in these precious memorials. *Then* there were more than a hundred thousand of these inscriptions.

To give some of De Rossi's details of the poor remnant recovered by his long and patient investigation: There were once at least 170 ancient Christian inscriptions in Rome which had an historical or monumental character; of these only 26 remain. In the Roman topographies of the seventh century, 140 sepulchres of famous martyrs and confessors are enumerated; we have only recovered some 20 of these precious memorials of the famous dead. In the first six centuries, some 60 Bishops of Rome were buried in the suburbs of the City, and only nine epitaphs have come to light, as yet, of these.

II.

We will now describe these Catacombs with greater and more exact detail. They consist of a vast labyrinth of narrow subterranean passages or galleries hewn out of the strata of volcanic earth that underlie most of the City and its suburbs. These galleries are excavated at different levels, forming separate stories, one beneath the other, communicating one with the other by narrow flights of steep stairs cut in the rock. These successive stories of galleries lie one below the other—sometimes there are as many as five of these stories. In the Cemetery of S. Callistus, in some parts, there are as many as seven. These galleries are not simply passages to the cemetery; they are the cemetery itself. The dead are laid in them, the walls being pierced with long horizontal recesses, or shelves, these recesses rising tier above tier. In some galleries five of these shelves are hewn out, in others six, and in others as many as twelve.

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They are divided from one another by a layer of volcanic rock as thin as is compatible with security.

In each of these shelves a body is laid; sometimes a shelf is constructed to receive two, three, or even four bodies. The shelves, after the bodies have been placed in them, are carefully fastened up with slabs of marble or with tiles, and carefully secured with mortar. It is on these slabs or tiles that the inscriptions and symbols are carved, or painted. In very many of the Catacomb galleries doors are constructed at regular intervals which lead into little chambers hewn out of the rock. These are usually what we should term family vaults. The roofs and walls of these chambers are sometimes elaborately adorned with paintings. In some of them the body of a martyr is buried. This gave peculiar sanctity to the spot, and as many shelves as possible were hollowed out in the little chamber for the reception of the dead, close proximity to a Martyr or Confessor being always especially prized as a last resting-place.

None of these cemeteries have been excavated beneath the seven classical hills of Rome proper, intermural interment being strictly forbidden by the State; alone the Emperors and the Vestal Virgins had the right of being buried within the ancient enclosure of the City of Servius Tullius. These wonderful Christian cemeteries were *all* excavated outside Rome, one, or at most two miles distant from the old City walls. They are, generally speaking, in the immediate neighbourhood of one of the great public roads—such as the Via Appia, the Via Ardeatina, the Via Nomentana, the Via Salaria, the Via Flaminia, the Via Latina, the Via Portuensis, the Via Labicana.

Different calculations by experts have been made as to the total length of these galleries of the dead. Father

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Marchi the Jesuit—one of the most illustrious of the later scholars who have devoted themselves for long years to the investigation of this great City of the Dead—estimates that some 700 miles of these galleries exist; other experts, however, calculate the total length as not exceeding 400 miles. These exact calculations, however, cannot be safely relied upon, as a very large portion of these galleries are as yet unexplored. The difficulty and expense and even danger of penetrating into many of these is fully recognised. The numbers, too, of the dead who lie in them also have been variously estimated. Some experts reckon as many as seven million—others would reduce the number to somewhere less than one half this number. But again the present unexplored state of much of the City of the Dead renders any *exact* calculation here impossible.

Roughly speaking, the work of excavation and the system of burying the dead in that mighty net-work of sepulchral galleries and chambers leading from them, was spread over two and a half centuries, viz.: from the days of the Apostles Peter and Paul, *circa* A.D. 50–67 down to *circa* A.D. 312—the date of the Peace of the Church—under Constantine the Great. After 312 A.D. the practice of burying in these Catacombs gradually came to an end; comparatively few were laid to rest in these hallowed cemeteries after the first half of the fourth century; and a few years later these subterranean cemeteries were closed for interments, and were only visited by devout visitors. As years went on, they became more and more the resort of pilgrims to Rome, being visited not only by Italians, but by strangers from far distant lands, the Catacombs ranking as one of the chief features of Christian interest in the immemorial city of the Kings, the Republic, and the Empire. This period of *Pilgrimage to the Catacombs* may be roughly

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dated as including the fifth, sixth, seventh, and part of the eighth centuries.

The soil, or to be more precise, the surface of the soil of the suburbs of Rome where the Catacombs have been excavated is peculiarly fitting for these vast works. It consists almost entirely of materials of volcanic origin. They are easily worked, and are of sufficient durability for these galleries and for the shelves on which the majority of the dead are laid, and for the chambers leading out of them—the technical term of the volcanic stratum in question is *Tufa granolari*.

* * * * *

The practice of burning the dead (cremation) was only introduced in Rome in the latter years of the Republic. The dictator, Cornelius Sylla, is said to have been the first among the Romans whose corpse was burnt; afterwards the custom prevailed very generally till the close of the fourth century of the Christian Era, when cremation seems to have been given up. This we learn from Macrobius ("Saturnalia," vii. 7, 5) who wrote in the last years of the fourth century.

From the beginning this use of burning the bodies was disliked and avoided by the Christian Church. In the "Octavius" of Minucius Felix—a very early Christian writing *circa* A.D. 160—we read that the followers of Jesus adopted "the better and more ancient custom of inhumation (nec, ut creditis ullum damnum sepulturae timemus sed veterem et meliorem consuetudinem humandi frequentamus"—xxxiv. 11, and also see xi. 3).

No doubt the first generation of Christians, in this as in many other traditional usages, followed the example of the Jews, who *never* adopted the practice of cremation; the example too of the burying the Master in the new tomb of

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Joseph of Arimathæa had great weight in the question of the disposal of their dead. This practice of burying the body became a universal Christian use, and no Christian inscription has ever been discovered in any of the Pagan Columbaria, where the ashes of the *cremated* dead were deposited. No Christian cinerary urn has as yet been found.

The Catacombs of Rome began in this wise: As early as the middle of the first century, it appears that the more wealthy followers of Jesus in Rome arranged in the gardens of their villas in the suburbs of the great Capital, or in a vineyard hard by the villa, a place of burial for their own family and dependants, freemen and slaves.

The first step in the formation of a private cemetery was the excavation of a passage round the area or plot of ground set apart for the interment of the dead, communicating with the surface by one or more little staircases, usually at the corners. Shelves termed loci (*loculi*) were cut in the walls of the passage or gallery to receive the dead. One or more little chambers were excavated leading out of the passage, for the head of the family or for the body of a martyr or of some distinguished Christian, who was offered the hospitality of the tomb.

Gradually as the members of the Christian community increased in number, the wealthy believers who had constructed a private cemetery further offered "the hospitality of the tomb" to other and poorer members of the congregation to which they belonged. More loci (*loculi*) were excavated in the passage or corridor, and when the first corridor or gallery was fully occupied, cross galleries were excavated on the same level. As time went on and more room for the dead was required, a second or lower story of galleries was formed on the same principle, and this was

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succeeded by a third story, and later by a fourth, or even by more stories, and thus the earliest Christian cemeteries were gradually formed. As the members of the congregations increased, as we know was the case, with considerable rapidity, the work of excavation was carried on by a distinct and trained class of skilled artisans known as "fossores." These were specially honoured and even ranked among the lower grades of the hierarchy of the Church. These fossores attained an extraordinary skill in their difficult craft, and the mighty network of subterranean cemeteries beneath the suburbs of Rome which still exist, after all these many centuries, with their innumerable corridors and separate chambers and staircases, is a permanent and abiding proof of their marvellous proficiency in their strange school of underground architecture. We have already noticed the calculations of experts which give these marvellous corridors of the dead a length positively of several hundred miles. The work went on for nearly 300 years.

III.

Now to sketch the story of these Catacombs through the ages. We have seen how the first generation of Christians buried their dead in the gardens of the rich. In the first years, no concealment was attempted, for instance, the well-known Cemetery of Domitilla on the Via Ardeatina was evidently open to public view.

Very soon however, certainly after the persecution of Nero, A.D. 64, the Roman Christians dreaded the publicity of the open garden-tomb, such as we see in the Domitilla Cemetery. At any moment the wild passions of the mob, who were taught to hate the Christians, might be

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aroused, and the sanctity of the quiet homes of the loved dead ones violated ; so very early indeed in the Christian story, the subterranean tombs in the garden or in the vineyard began to be excavated.

This went on through the latter years of the first century, and all through the second. More or less, these cemeteries, —" Catacombs," as they are now termed—were the property of private individuals. As the Roman Christian community grew, as we know it did, with a strange rapidity, these private cemeteries, becoming larger and larger, assumed a more public character.

In the first years of the third century, when Zephyrinus was Bishop of Rome (he sat [*sedit*] from A.D. 202–218), we read in the " Philosophumena " of Hippolytus—a contemporary work—how this Zephyrinus " placed the Archdeacon Callistus, who was subsequently Bishop of Rome, over *The* Cemetery. *The* cemetery in question was that large group of Catacombs generally known later as the Catacombs of S. Callistus, on the Appian Way. It was one of the largest and most important of the many subterranean Cities of the Christian dead which were rapidly being excavated all round the great Capital, and was probably known as " *The* cemetery." This is the earliest formal intimation we possess of these Catacombs becoming the property of the collective Roman Church. A special chamber was here prepared for the burial of the Bishops of Rome. Up to this time the Roman Bishops had been solemnly laid to rest on the Vatican Hill, in the crypt originally prepared for them by Anacletus, the third in succession of the Bishops of Rome ; close to the tomb of S. Peter. Some nine of these earliest prelates of the congregation of Roman Christians lie there, as the " Liber Pontificalis " tells us in each case " Juxta corpus beati Petri in Vaticanum "

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In that most sacred of historical burying places—in the great Basilica on the Vatican Hill—sleep Linus, Cletus (Anacletus), Evaristus, Sixtus I., Telesphorus, Hyginus, Pius I., Eleutherus, and Victor. There they rest to this day close to the sarcophagus of the traditional founder of the Church of Rome—the blessed Peter—and to use the striking words of Ubaldi, who officially relates what was *seen* in the year 1626, when the foundations of the massive bronze baldachino of Bernini were excavated during the Pontificate of Urban VIII. in the Basilica of S. Peter—"The bodies of 'the nine' surround S. Peter, just as they would have done when living, at a Synod or Council."

Victor was the last Bishop of Rome buried in the Vatican crypt. Of the eighteen Roman Bishops who followed Victor, thirteen were buried in the Papal crypt of the Callistus Catacomb on the Appian Way, Zephyrinus who succeeded Victor being the first in order of these.

Early in the same century (the third), other Cemeteries (or Catacombs) passed into the public possession of the Roman Church. This is expressly alluded to in the "Liber Pontificalis" in the Note on Bishop Fabian who succeeded Zephyrinus A.D. 238.

During the third century the Catacombs were enormously increased as the members of the Christian congregation of Rome rapidly multiplied, attaining in the first half of the fourth century their present vast extent.

It was during the short but terrible persecution of the Emperor Decius, A.D. 249–51, and to a far greater extent in the course of the long drawn out cruel persecution of the Emperors Diocletian and Galerius, which began in A.D. 303, and continued with unabated rage for several years, that the "earthing up," as it is termed, of the Catacombs must be dated. To preserve the sacred dead

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from the rude hands of the Pagan soldiers, innumerable entrances and staircases were destroyed—and some galleries were filled up completely with earth—and since those days of darkness and gloom, no human eye has looked on much of the subterranean City of the Christian dead; no subsequent search works have penetrated as yet into many of these hidden galleries. The work of Pope Damasus at the end of the fourth century—which we shall speak of directly—only embraced a comparatively small portion of the vast "City" of the dead.

The victory of Constantine the Great brought peace to the Church, a peace that, save during the brief meteoric career of the Pagan Emperor Julian, has never been broken. A new era in the story of the Catacombs began after the year of grace 312. Only a few subterranean cemeteries were excavated, the majority of the Christian dead of all ranks after this date found their last resting-place in open sun-lit God's acres. The interments in the ancient Catacombs every year grew fewer and fewer. It was mainly the desire to lay the remains of some dear one in the neighbourhood of an honoured Martyr or Confessor, with the strange but pious hope of thereby deriving some help and comfort for the soul in the new life, that prompted the comparatively few burials in the Catacombs in the years which followed the victory of the Church under Constantine.

The next event in our Catacomb story to be chronicled is the work of Damasus in these sacred cemeteries. Damasus was Bishop of Rome from A.D. 366 to A.D. 384. His Pontificate of 18 years will ever be remembered, owing to his splendid devotion to, and unwearied toil among, these wonderful galleries where the Christian dead lay.

When Damasus became Chief Pontiff of the great and powerful Church in Rome, the fame of the Catacombs had

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spread far and wide. Pilgrims to the resting-place of the many distinguished Martyrs and Confessors who had witnessed a good confession in the Queen City, began to flock Romewards from distant lands. But access to these sacred tombs was difficult, and in many cases impossible. The "earthing up," the destruction and the concealment of the staircases and entrances, which we have mentioned as taking place in the long-continued terrible persecution of Diocletian, effectually hindered any near approach to most of the now famous shrines of the holy dead.

In any writing touching upon these strange and wonderful Catacombs, Damasus must hold a distinguished place. With him, the care of these vast cemeteries was one long labour of love. He recognised their importance in the history of early Christianity, as no other has ever done. In the vast network of cemeteries more or less hidden and unapproachable, he carefully opened up many galleries which had been "earthed up" in the times of the persecution of Diocletian; he repaired not a few of the broken and ruined staircases, and in some cases constructed fresh stairs. In the case of some of the famous shrines he opened shafts which admitted air and light. We find constant traces, too, of the work he caused to be carried out by way of supporting the friable walls of the galleries which had been injured in the attempt to conceal the tombs from the rough and profane hands of the imperial soldiers. The arches and "thrusts" of brick and stonework built up by Damasus in these ruined places still act as supports in the galleries he re-opened.

Nor was he content with mere repair work, with simply rendering the access to some of the more famous shrines possible, and even easy to the ever-increasing number of pilgrims, but in many cases this indefatigable lover of the

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Catacombs adorned the sacred shrines with precious marbles. Many too are the tablets of inscriptions which he placed in the spots especially visited by pilgrims.

These inscriptions are often couched in verses, for Damasus was evidently no mean poet. He was assisted here by one who was evidently a true artist, who carved on the marble and stone of Damasus' tablets the verses, often beautiful and touching, of his master in singularly beautiful characters. The name of this artist has never been forgotten —it was Furius Dionysius Filocalus. Many of these Damasine tablets have been preserved.

One good and useful work of this famous lover of the Catacombs deserves especially to be remembered. It had become a not unfrequent practice among certain of the Roman Christians, after the Peace of the Church, to purchase for themselves the privilege of being interred close to the resting-place of some celebrated Saint or Confessor (we have already alluded to this practice)—utterly regardless of the irreparable mischief which was the result of their strange though not uncommon desire. Often a curious and beautiful painting of the earlier days would be ruthlessly cut away to provide a place for the dead, hard by some Martyr's tomb.

This practice Damasus vehemently opposed, and evidently with success, for it seemingly ceased in the course of his Pontificate. His "mind" here is admirably expressed in a verse which was found in the sacred Papal crypt of the Catacomb of Callistus. No one had a better right than Damasus to be buried among his predecessors, several of whom were Martyrs and Confessors: but he sleeps with his mother and sister in a crypt hard by the Via Ardeatina. The verse in question was found among the ruins of the Papal crypt.

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"Hic fateor Damasus volui mea condere membra,
Sed cineres timui sanctos vexare piorum."

("I, Damasus, confess that I longed to have my remains deposited *here*—but I feared to disturb the ashes of holy men.")

The question may probably suggest itself to some students—how came it about that so many Martyrs' tombs were reckoned among the special glories of the Catacombs—how could such an expression be used as that of S. Leo, who thanks "the Lord for having deigned to encircle Rome with a glorious crown of Martyrs." (Sacramentary preface to feast of SS. John and Paul.) In reply, the almost universally followed practice of the Roman magistracy may be quoted—*Rome never warred with the dead.* The imperial officials were in the habit of usually giving up to their friends the remains of those who had been punished with death, without regard to the crime for which they had suffered. Ulpian, for instance, tells us that this humane custom was only broken through under exceptional circumstances. Only very rarely were the bodies of Martyrs not restored to those who loved them, after they had suffered, and then the rare refusal was based upon the dread of the magistrates that the possession of the sacred relics might rekindle the fervour of the obstinate Christian sect; but this happened seldom, and many of the more ancient Catacombs, we know began in the first instance with the Tomb of a Martyr buried in the garden of a wealthy Christian proselyte.

The example of the Roman Governor Pilate at once giving up the body of the Crucified Lord to Joseph of Arimathæa to be buried in his garden tomb, will be remembered.

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Story of the Catacombs after the Works of Pope Damasus.

Only twenty-six years after the death of Damasus, the Roman world was appalled by the capture and sack of Rome by Alaric in A.D. 410. This was the first of a long series of disasters which befell the glorious Capital of the Empire. Briefly to enumerate the principal of these hostile occupations and pillages of Rome and its suburbs:—

	A.D.
Alaric (the Visigoth)	410
Genseric (the Vandal)	455
Ricimer (the Sueve)	472
Vitiges (the Goth)	537
Totila (the Ostrogoth)	546
Astolphus (the Lombard) . . .	756

More or less the Catacombs suffered grievously from each of these barbarian raids on Rome. The invaders seem to have often entered the sacred city of the dead, and to have disturbed the precious contents. Now in their search for hidden treasure which they expected to find in the tombs—now with the idea of possessing themselves of relics to which they no doubt attached a superstitious value.

Few details, however, of these repeated barbarian raids in the Catacombs have been preserved. Such an entry, however, as we find in the "Liber Pontificalis" relating to Vitiges' raid gives us some idea of the mischief worked by these successive invasions and pillages.

"Ecclesia et corpora Sanctorum exterminata sunt a Gothis."

Several of the Bishops of Rome we read from time to time endeavoured to repair the ruin and desolation which

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invariably followed in the track of the barbarian invaders —notably the Popes Vigilius, John III., Sergius I., and Gregory III. were conspicuous for their loving labours here.

During these three centuries and a half which we roughly reckon as the duration of this period of the Catacomb history, the subterranean cemeteries were visited by a steady stream of pilgrims from all lands and nations. "Itineraries" or "Pilgrim Guide-Books" were carefully prepared for their guidance—several of these interesting and precious compilations have been found, and these have formed perhaps the most valuable pieces of contemporary information used by the scholar De Rossi in his investigation into the Catacomb story. These "Pilgrim Itineraries" that have come to light, can be roughly dated A.D. 625, 628, 650, 750.

The most destructive of these foreign raids appears to have been the one conducted by Astolphus and the Lombards in the year of grace 756. The desolate condition of the Catacombs after the Lombard occupation determined Pope Paul I., shortly after A.D. 757, to translate some of the more venerated remains from the sadly desecrated Catacombs to a more secure home in the City itself. This first translation of the remains of Martyrs and Confessors, however, only included about one hundred of these. This Pontiff mournfully relates his reasons for this removal of bodies from their first resting-place—a removal he evidently deplored.

Pope Paul I. has left on record his exact reasons for thus violating the sanctity of the grave by his translation of the remains of the one hundred or more Saints and Confessors from their Catacomb tomb to the safer shadow of a Roman church. He mourned over the ruinous state into which these

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hallowed sepulchres had fallen—a ruin which dated before the raid of Astolphus and his Lombards; but their depredations seem to have been the immediate cause of his action.

The Pope complained that the sacred services in the Chapels of the dead had ceased. Beasts ranged about the corridors and chambers at their pleasure. Some parts of the Catacombs were even arranged as stables and as pens for sheep. Dirt and corruption everywhere defiled the whilom honoured sanctuaries.

In A.D. 761, to the music of solemn hymns and chanted prayer, the one hundred dead were reverently translated from their desecrated graves, and were laid again to rest in the Church of S. Stephen and S. Sylvester.

Paul I.'s immediate successors, Stephen I., Adrian I., and Leo III. made no further advance in this translation work, but endeavoured to restore something like order in the partly ruined galleries.

But things grew worse and worse in the now desolate and exposed Campagna immediately outside the City walls. Paschal I., who followed Leo III., felt that if the sacred remains of the Saints and Martyrs, so long one of the chief glories of Christian Rome, were to be preserved for the veneration of the faithful of future generations, they must be at once removed from the Catacombs to a more secure resting-place. On the 20th July, A.D. 817—the exact date of the translation of the great dead has been preserved—Pope Paschal I., with all reverence, translated the remains of 2300 Saints and Martyrs from the Catacomb galleries and Chambers to the Church of S. Prassede on the Esquiline Hill.

This is the Church referred to by Browning in his wild wonderful poem on "The Bishop who orders his tomb in S. Praxed" (S. Prassede).

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"S. Praxed's ever was the Church for peace,

* * * * *

And then how I shall lie through centuries
And hear the blessed mutter of the Mass

* * * * *

And feel the steady candle flame, and taste
Good strong thick stupefying incense smoke!

* * * * *

—Leave me in my Church, the Church for peace."

We hear of yet a few more translations of saintly remains which still seem to have been left in their old home, even after this wholesale removal of Pope Paschal I. The Popes Sergius II. and Leo IV., in the years of grace 844 and 847, brought some more of the relics of Martyrs into the City, and buried them in the Churches of SS. Sylvester and Martin, and the Quattro Coronati.

There is a legend, to which however De Rossi gives little credence, that as far back as Pope Boniface IV.'s days, early in the seventh century, several wagon loads of remains of the dead were brought from the Catacombs and interred in the Pantheon, which had lately been given to him as Bishop of Rome by the Constantinopolitan Emperor Phocas, who claimed the great Pantheon Temple of Rome as Roman emperor.

To this early translation—so goes the story—was owing the consecration of the glorious Pantheon Temple of Agrippa, the friend of Augustus Cæsar, as a Christian church, under the title of "S. Maria ad Martyres."

De Rossi wholly disbelieves in this legend of the many wagon loads of remains, thus early translated, and considers that the strange legend took its rise from the many relics which gave the Christian title to the Pantheon—relics which were probably linen cloths which had been

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laid on the tombs of the Martyrs, and presented to the Christianised Pantheon as holy relics.

But of the *truth* of the translation of the sainted remains by the several Popes above alluded to—and particularly that carried out by Paschal I. in A.D. 817, there can be no doubt. The relation of the removal is circumstantial, and the exact reason for the translation is carefully set out.

The story of the Catacombs in the early Middle Ages was now closed ; the reason for pilgrimage to the shrines, existed no longer—their sacred contents had largely disappeared. We hear no more of pilgrims' visits to these time-honoured cemeteries ; and from this date during the later Middle Ages, in the accounts that pilgrims have left us of their visits to the wonders of Rome, scarcely two or three times does any mention of the Catacombs occur. Gradually the very existence of the great subterranean City was forgotten, as though it had never existed. An impenetrable pall of darkness fell over the Catacombs from the middle years of the ninth century, a veil which was only lifted by that chance discovery we have described in the gardens hard by the Salarian Way in the latter years of the sixteenth century—the days of the English Elizabeth.

This strange veil of darkness and utter forgetfulness lay over the still City of the Christian Dead of Rome for some seven centuries and a half.

IV.

There is no question but that a very general idea has for centuries been current in the Church that the Christianity of the first three centuries was *hostile* to Art—to painting

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as well as to sculpture. It is only in recent years that this conception has been found to be quite erroneous.

Now the most scholarly outcome of the great Tractarian or Oxford movement in the "forties" of the last century (the nineteenth) was the "Library of the Fathers" put out by Dr. Pusey and his friends at Oxford. A very learned and somewhat exhaustive note in the "Tertullian" of this great work well exemplifies this erroneous conception. In this note occurs the following paragraph :—

"The introduction of any paintings into Churches may date about the time of Paulinus of Nola (in the last years of the fourth century). The prohibition of the Council of Eliberis (Elvira) at the beginning of the same century implies a disposition to introduce them. That Council prohibits all pictures."

And again in the course of the long exhaustive note in question, we read : "Private individuals had pictures, but it was discouraged." "The first mention of pictures in churches (except to forbid them) is at the end of the fourth century, and these are mostly historical pictures from the Old Testament, or of martyrdoms, not of individuals." "No account of any picture of our Lord being publicly used, occurs in the first six centuries."

Is it possible that this very generally received opinion on the question of the repugnance of the Christians of the first three centuries to Art is a mistaken one after all, and that just as the more enlightened Christians studied and welcomed the great writings of the Pagan world, so too in the realm of Art, so far from looking at it as frivolous and harmful, the majority of believers in the "Name" adopted it at once ; it became part of their life, a something that they could enjoy? Now can we really show that they found in it a real and innocent enjoyment and refreshment ?

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An eminent and deservedly a widely-read author a very few years ago—in our own day and time—wrote as follows:—

"The popular, the actual belief of a generation or society of men cannot always be ascertained from the contemporary writers, who belong for the most part to another stratum. The belief of a people is something separate from the books or the watchwords of parties. It is in the air. It is in their intimate conversation. We must hear, especially in the case of the simple and unlearned, what they talk of to each other. We must sit by their bedsides, get at what gives them most consolation, what most occupies their last moments. This, whatever it be, is the belief of the people, right or wrong, this and this only, is their real religion . . . (Now is it possible—said the late Dean Stanley of Westminster, for it is from him I am quoting these remarkable words—) now is it possible to ascertain this concerning the early Christians?

"The books of that period—the Dean went on to say—are few and far between, and those books are for the most part the works of learned scholars rather than of popular writers. Can we, apart from these books, discover what was their most real and constant representation of their dearest hopes here and hereafter? Strange to say, after all this lapse of time (getting on for some 2000 years) it is possible; the answer, at any rate, for that large mass of Christians from all parts of the Empire that was collected in the capital, the answer is to be found in the Roman Catacombs"—that great city of the dead which lies beneath the soil of the immediate suburbs of imperial Rome. This city of the dead, you will remember, certainly contains several hundred miles of streets of tombs, and the tombs at least contain three or more millions of silent dwellers!

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In this city of the dead, the community of Rome, by far the greatest of the early Christian churches who professed the faith of Jesus, for some two centuries and a half reverently laid their dear ones as they passed from the stir of busy restless Roman life into the unseen world. There in these Catacombs they used to pray often, very often in the years of persecution; there they used to hear the teaching of Hope and Faith from the lips of some chosen master—and it is from the words written or graven upon the innumerable tombs in the Catacombs that we gather what was the real belief of these early congregations—what were their sure hopes and onlooks. In these silent streets, on the walls of the countless sepulchral chambers, they loved to paint pictures telling of these same hopes and onlooks. Some of these pictures, often dim and discoloured, often mutilated, are with us still. Not a few of the artists who worked there were evidently men of no mean power in their noble craft.

Ruined, desecrated, spoiled though it now is, with only comparatively small portions accessible at all—what a treasure house for the quiet thoughtful scholar is this silent City of the Dead!

And it is quite a new discovery for us—only in the last half century has its importance been recognised in the scholar-world. The Catacombs were rediscovered some three and a quarter centuries ago, but only in these last few years have a few scholars begun to recognise how weighty, how important was the testimony they brought to our knowledge of very early Christian thought. It is noticeable how profoundly ignorant of the vast mass of contemporary evidence to the details of popular belief among the first generations of Christians contained in this mighty City of the Dead, the writers of Ecclesiastical History generally

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have been. Dean Stanley calls special attention to this curious ignorance, and cities as examples, Gibbon, Mosheim, and Neander, in whose works no allusion to the Catacombs appears. In very early times but little is said about them in the Fathers—Jerome, for instance, simply tells us how their glories impressed him in the days of his youth. Prudentius, whose striking and beautiful poetry was written in the latter part of the fourth century, certainly does allude to the paintings in the Catacombs, but gives us but scanty information on the subject, and does not seem to be aware of their number or of their importance.

In the fifth and two following centuries, it is true that these Catacombs became an object of great veneration to the pilgrim visitors to Rome, but it was the special shrines of famous martyrs who had been buried amidst the crowd of the Christian dead which attracted their attention; to the paintings and inscriptions on the thousand thousand tombs, which told of the life and the hopes of the first generations of Christians, they seemed to have paid little heed.

We have maintained that a careful study of the more recent discoveries in the Catacombs, throws much light, and on certain points often a *new* light on the opinions and thoughts of the Christians of the first and second centuries, showing us that the current of early Christian thought not unfrequently ran in a different channel to the stream of thoughts and ideas presented to us by the contemporary writers of that very early period. It must, however, be emphatically pressed home that the cardinal doctrines of the Faith taught by the weightiest of the first Christian writers were absolutely identical with the belief of the Christians of the Roman Catacombs. If anything, the supreme divinity of the Son of God—His love for, His care for men, is emphasized more emphatically, if it were possible, in the

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silent Catacomb teaching than in the fervid dogmatism of the great Catholic writers.

It is rather in certain details which belong to every-day life, that the divergences in Christian thought, to which we are alluding, are found.

The limits of a single lecture compel me to select only *one* out of the various special points of teaching emphasized in what we find in these corridors and chambers of the dead—we call the Roman Catacombs. Now what does it tell us of "Art" in the Roman Christian community in the earliest years of the Faith—bearing in mind that the Christian congregation in Rome was by far the largest, the most important, the most representative of all the early Christian communities?

Now there is no doubt but that in the Christianity of the first days, there *was* a school of teaching which more or less discouraged Art, which looked askance upon Painting and Sculpture. Tertullian, who wrote at the end of the second century, is a good example of this School. Two grounds of this feeling existed—the one derived from the Synagogue, the other from the Pagan temple. The strict Hebrew, it is true, viewed all painted and sculptured figures with intense repugnance. The Pagan temple, on the other hand, was richly adorned with painted and sculptured figures. The close connection of the early Christian Church with the Synagogue would naturally account for this distaste and repugnance of Art which characterised the writings of not a few of the early Christian teachers, while the use of Art in the adornment of the detested Idol-temples emphasized this hostile feeling.

But what we find in these Catacombs—repeated in a thousand instances—tells us that this dislike of, this repugnance to Art, emphatically was *not* the universal, not even

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the *ordinary* opinion of the mass of the Christians of the first days.

De Rossi, that great scholar and student of our own days of the Catacomb world, asks: "Is it thinkable, on first thoughts, that the Church, hardly as yet drawn apart from the Synagogue—that bitter foe to all painted and sculptured figures—had already in the very days of the Apostles and their immediate disciples, in the midst too of its stern conflict with idolatry, positively welcomed in her most sacred scenes, and so to speak, *baptised* Art in its varied forms?"

And yet the answer in the *affirmative* is emphatically given by the many and various artistic decorations, including figures, symbols, fruits, and flowers, which adorned in gracious profusion, many of the sepulchral chambers and chapels of the Catacombs—chambers and chapels, some of them without doubt dating from the days of the Apostles and the years immediately succeeding their passing away.

Amidst the wreckage of this City of the Dead, we have still with us conspicuous examples of this elaborate decorative Art, notably in the very early Cemetery of Domitilla, in the Crypt of Lucina which forms the older part of the Cemetery of Callistus, in the vault of Januarius in the same Catacomb, in parts of the very ancient Cemetery of Priscilla, to take a few well-known examples.

Now in the first century of the Christian Era, and indeed during the greater part of the second century, Art in the Roman Empire was at its best, and the conversion to Christianity of many eminent and wealthy persons in the first century, including members of the reigning imperial house, such as Domitilla and Flavius Clemens, no doubt brought in its train the employment of skilled and competent artists in the decorative work of the Chambers of their

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Tombs. In the dim and fading pictures which cover the ceilings and adorn the walls of some of the oldest Catacombs of the first and early in the second centuries, we can still trace the exquisite skill of the artist painter in the beautiful confusion of the best period of classical Art (le désordre harmonieux et charmant de l'Art antique). These tombs are decorated with exquisitely painted rose bushes, with vines loaded with clusters of grapes, with birds, with little winged angels, all grouped round the pathetic picture of the Good Shepherd, with a lost sheep He had found straying, on His shoulders.

Such were the beginnings of Christian Art. The communities of believers in Rome adopted, we see, for the decoration of their mortuary chambers and the little chapels of the Catacombs, the graceful and beautiful work of the artists of the Pagan Empire in the midst of which they lived, quietly adding to each classical design one or several Christian figures or symbols of known import. This impressed upon the whole work—so to speak—*a Christian seal*: with this addition it could not be, nor ever was, mistaken for a merely Pagan conception.

When the first and second centuries had run their course, it is evident that a marked deterioration crept over the artistic work in the Catacombs. But this deterioration was not peculiar to the Christian Art, it had already made marked progress in the Art of the great world of Rome around them. The work in the Catacomb chambers and chapels became less graceful, harder, more rigid, less inventive; and as the third century advanced, the character of the decoration and painting in the Catacombs became more and more hieratic and fixed in character. Scenes from the Old and New Testament history, probably determined upon by religious authority, gradually took the place of

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the gracious figures of the Good Shepherd and the touching symbols of life and death, with the more artistic and classical setting so noticeable in the older sepulchral chambers and chapels of the Catacombs of the first and second centuries.

And later, in the fourth century, after the triumph of the Church under Constantine, the character of religious paintings underwent a still further change. The old garden scenes, the Good Shepherd, the roses, and the vines, the dove, the anchor and the mystic fish, symbols of a happy death and of a new and brighter life, gave place to historic subjects, and as time went on, the cruel suffering of the brave and patient martyr, never depicted by the older Christian masters, became a favourite subject for the decoration of the walls and ceilings of the new Churches and Basilicas, and of the grander tombs which rapidly arose *above* ground in the now triumphant Christianity.

It has been well and truly said that in the Catacombs where so many of the devoted martyrs of the first two centuries sleep, the decorations, often beautiful and elaborate, only represent what is noble and exalted; there is no sign of mourning in them, no token of resentment, no expression of vengeance; in the Catacombs all breathes softness benevolence, boundless charity, exhaustless love.

In this too brief sketch of the earliest Christian art, only *Painting* has been referred to; Dean Milman, who, I think, was the first great ecclesiastical historian who in any real way recognised the true importance of the Catacomb testimony, thus writes: "*Sculpture* alone of the fine arts has been faithful to its parent Paganism; it has never cordially embraced the spirit of Christianity." Milman's observation is on the whole accurate. There is, no doubt, with rare exceptions, an absence of anything that can be termed sculp-

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ture in the Roman Catacombs, and this absence has had a considerable effect on the adoption of sculpture among the Christian arts.

The fact of the large employment of painting in the great City of the Dead from the days of the Apostles to the Peace of the Church in the first quarter of the fourth century, has, it cannot be doubted, had a marked effect upon the use of the Church, indeed of Christianity generally. It may be said to have "popularised" painting. It handed down what can be fairly called a sacred tradition. For two centuries and a half the men and women of the long-drawn-out persecution who were ready to give up all, even dear life, for the Master's sake, loved this special form of decoration for the resting-places of their dead, for the shrines of their martyred brethren, for their first chapels and sanctuaries, and this was never forgotten; and when the Church triumphed and had become the religion of the world of Rome, *painting* became the Art "*par excellence*" loved by the Christian world. That love has never all through the Christian centuries waned or paled. It is with us still, this love—*born in the Roman Catacombs*—it will endure till the end comes.

To this Christian tradition we owe the enormous preponderance of the choice of religious subjects as the groundwork of so many of our pictures. This was more observable among the great Masters of the Middle Ages and indeed of the Renaissance period than in later years; but it is still markedly noticeable.

Sculpture, on the other hand, possessing no such hallowed traditions—no "Catacomb ancestry," so to speak—has never won the key of Christian hearts in the way Painting has won that golden key; so Milman's remark is just as far as it reached. But that great writer and thinker

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errs in not giving us the reason for the absence of sculpture from the Catacomb story.

This absence, or rather the extreme scarcity of the Sister-Art in the great City of the Dead, was not due to any special preference for painting among the Roman Christians of the first days, but simply because for all purposes of decoration in the subterranean Catacomb chambers and chapels, sculpture was well-nigh impossible. The painter with his few materials could pursue his loved and beautiful art in all security on the plaster of wall and ceiling of the tomb-chamber, or of the little Chapel ; while the studio and workshop of the sculptor, on the other hand, was of necessity above ground in the great city. And, in those days when popular feeling ran so high, and was often so bitterly hostile to Christianity—the life of a *Christian* sculptor would have been in daily peril. The few sarcophagi, for instance, which date before the Peace of the Church in the fourth century, that have been discovered, came no doubt from studios and workshops in the great City, but the Christian symbols and figures carved upon them are most rare. We possess, however, not a few pieces of Christian sculpture, notably sarcophagi, dating from periods shortly after the Peace of the Church, when the craft could be pursued without danger. These are found in Rome, Ravenna, and Milan, in Spain, in Southern Gaul, notably in Arles, where evidently a Christian school for these sculptured sarcophagi flourished. Sculpture, from the middle of the fourth century onwards, became a recognised Christian art ; but from the reasons above suggested, it possessed no hallowed tradition dating from the first days—the days of persecution. This hallowed tradition was the precious inheritance alone of Painting.

* * * * *

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Catacombs.—The term is derived from the Greek words Κατά κύμβη (cumbe) signifying a hollow or valley (Cwm, Combe). The district on the Appian Way, where the little ancient Basilica of S. Sebastian now stands, was originally known as the district "ad Catacumbas," "The Hollows." In the earlier years of the ninth century, owing to the circumstances above related, the subterranean cemeteries of Rome ceased to be an object of interest and of pilgrimage, and were gradually forgotten. All through the Middle Ages, however, one of these "forgotten" cemeteries remained an object of reverence and subsequently of pilgrimage, viz. that of S. Sebastian,* no doubt owing to its traditional connection with the bodies of Peter and Paul, which, from the district in which it was situated was known as "cemeterium ad catacumbas."

Thus for many cemeteries, among the shrines and many objects of pilgrimage at Rome, the crypt or cemetery of S. Sebastian "ad Catacumbas" still maintained a prominent position. A pilgrimage "ad Catacumbas" (to the Catacombs) took its place with other sacred spots to be visited. Gradually the appellation of the district, "ad Catacumbas," where the cemetery in question was situated, came to be used for similar underground crypts in other centres besides Rome. We find the term used at Naples as early as the ninth century. On the rediscovery of the great City of the Dead at Rome, late in the sixteenth century, the popular name of "The Catacombs" was generally used for *all* the many subterranean cemeteries which were found to exist in the immediate suburbs of Rome.

* A special interest was attached to S. Sebastian, as there was an ancient tradition that the bodies of SS. Peter and Paul had reposed in the crypt of S. Sebastian for a short period, after an unsuccessful attempt of the Greeks to carry their precious relics from Rome. S. Gregory the Great refers to this tradition.

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But it is a curious misnomer, and was utterly unknown in its present signification in ancient times. The old name for "the great City of the Dead" lying beneath the suburbs of Rome, was *κοιμητήρια*—the cemeteries or sleeping places.

The statistics and other details in the foregoing little "study," are largely drawn from Paul Allard's admirable French edition of Northcote and Brownlow's exhaustive and scholarly résumé of "De Rossi's Discoveries in Roman Catacombs" (*Paris*, MDCCCLXXVII.) From Dr. Northcote's Book on "the Epitaphs of the Catacombs" (*London*, 1878). From Horace Marucchi's "Itinéraire des Catacombs" (*Rome* and *Paris*, 1903). The last named being a work of enormous erudition and research, which brings up the story of the scientific exploration of the Roman Catacombs to the present day and time.

Marucchi, who was the friend and companion of De Rossi, while carefully examining each of the Catacombs at present available for exploration, especially selects the very ancient Cemetery of Priscilla, on the Via Salaria Nova, which dates from the first and second centuries, for a detailed account.

One noticeable fact, after a careful study of the works of the great modern explorers of the Catacombs, impresses itself on the mind of the student. The enormous extent of the "as yet" unexplored areas of the Roman City of the Dead.

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